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TAGS: PREL PGOV IV CH

SUBJECT: CHINESE VIEWS ON COTE D'IVOIRE

Classified By: POLITICAL/ECONOMIC SECTION CHIEF SILVIA EIRIZ FOR REASON
S 1.4 (B, D)

¶1. (C) Summary. Chinese Embassy Political Counselor Fulin Ma told Pol/Econ section chief February 25 that he thinks elections will take place in 2008, most likely between August and October. Ma believes there is a real chance for President Gbagbo to win transparent elections due to the average citizen's perception that he is one of them, his access to the government's economic resources, and Ivoirians' fear that change will bring renewed instability. Regarding bilateral relations, China is financing lodgings to be used by members of the legislature in the political capital of Yamoussoukro. Ma said his government will also build a hospital in Gagnoa and 2 schools in Abidjan and is in the process of identifying another major infrastructure project with the Government of Cote d'Ivoire. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Pol/Econ Section Chief met with Chinese Embassy Political Counselor Fulin Ma on February 25 to discuss Cote d'Ivoire's political situation and the bilateral relationship between China and Cote d'Ivoire. Ma, who has served in Cote d'Ivoire for 3 years, will be permanently departing in 2 to 3 months and returning to Beijing. Ma told Poloff that he had previously served in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' (MFA) Africa Bureau in Beijing.

¶3. (C) Ma described the situation in Cote d'Ivoire as "strange" and noted that it is not really a crisis. He explained that the country's problems were simmering under the surface during the 33-year tenure of President Felix Houphouet-Boigny and came to the fore once Cote d'Ivoire no longer had a strong chief executive. Ma believes that the Ivoirian crisis is about political power and the access to economic resources that accompanies it.

Elections Will Take Place

¶4. (C) Ma said he believes elections will take place in 2008 and that the August to October timeframe seems most realistic. Ma believes elections will be held this year due to pressure from the international community and because it may benefit Gbagbo to have elections sooner rather than later. Ma said Gbagbo will put off holding elections if he is afraid he can't win. He added, however, that the Ivoirian people want elections quickly so that there can be a return to normalcy and that Gbagbo will lose popularity and a chance to be elected if he postpones elections too long.

¶5. (C) Ma believes there is a real chance Gbagbo could win fairly transparent elections today. Ma noted that Gbagbo has the economic resources of the government at his disposal and, in his travels around the country, has made big promises

about his intent to improve the nation's infrastructure and local living conditions. He added that Gbagbo can buy people with influence who can deliver votes and noted that many ministers in previous governments now serve as Gbagbo advisors and are given a salary. Ma said that, unlike his political opponents, Gbagbo knows how to attract people and average citizens feel that he is close to them. Ma said many Ivoirians will vote for Gbagbo because they will see it as a vote for peace. Ma explained that many Ivoirians are afraid that there will be disorder if another candidate is elected.

¶ 6. (C) Ma admitted that the failure to disarm the Forces Nouvelles (FN) and the militia before elections could contribute to a higher likelihood of violence. However, he noted that the possibility of disorder has been lessened since the FN have been legitimized by their participation in the government. Ma said the FN practically administer the north for the government. Ma stated that disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) is a real point of contention between the government and the FN and suggested it is possible that the government will declare that DDR is finished before the elections even if there is little tangible progress.

Bilateral Relationship

¶ 7. (C) Ma said China's involvement in Cote d'Ivoire is slight compared to other countries in Africa because the Ivoirian crisis began just when China increased its cooperation with Africa. Ma explained that China's practice in an African country is to construct a large project and a series of smaller ones. Ma said the large project in Cote d'Ivoire was the building that will house members of the legislature in the political capital of Yamoussoukro. Ma said it was

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finished about 2 years ago and built by Ivoirian workers who were overseen by Chinese technicians. Once construction was completed, according to Ma, the Government of Cote d'Ivoire asked if China could assist with equipment and furnishings and China agreed. Ma said that process should be completed in about 1 to 2 months.

¶ 8. (C) According to Ma, the Chinese Government will build a hospital in Gagnoa (Gbagbo's home village) before the end of ¶ 2009. Ma said the Government of Cote d'Ivoire had originally requested an enormously large state of the art hospital in Yamoussoukro, but the Chinese government refused to agree because the project has to be finished before 2009. Ma said the Chinese suggested building a smaller hospital in Abidjan, but President Gbagbo dismissed this idea on the grounds that Abidjan already has many services and, thus, attracts more people. Ma said the Government of Cote d'Ivoire chose Gagnoa as the location. Ma told Poloff that China will also build 2 schools in the Abidjan area and that he believed work on these had already begun. In addition, the Chinese Government is building a conference hall for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which should be completed in May or June, and is located near the MFA building.

¶ 9. (C) Ma advised that the Government of China is engaged in discussions with the Government of Cote d'Ivoire to identify another large project to be financed by China. Ma explained that no decision has been made because the Ivoirian government keeps changing its mind about what it would like. Ma added that the Ivoirians have suggested an exposition hall and a stadium and have once again brought up building a large, modern hospital in Yamoussoukro. According to Ma, it is likely that the seat of the government will at least partially be moved to Yamoussoukro because this fits with Gbagbo's decentralization policy.

¶ 10. (C) Ma, who handles the military portfolio at the Embassy in the absence of a Defense Attaché, said the military bilateral relationship is practically nonexistent given the

UN arms embargo. Ma noted that 2 Ivoirian soldiers had traveled to China for a week, explaining that it was just a visit and not training. Ma told Poloff that the Ivoirian Defense Minister, during his November 2007 visit to China, had requested Chinese assistance in setting up its DDR civic service program. Ma said the Chinese government declined because the Ivoirians seemed unclear about the program's framework and parameters

¶11. (SBU) According to Ma, there are 3 Chinese enterprises in Cote d'Ivoire: 1) a factory producing pharmaceuticals located in the Youpougon neighborhood of Abidjan, 2) a factory producing agricultural machinery located on the road to the airport that has captured 80 percent of the market, and 3) a factory producing trucks that has received no contracts due to the arms embargo.

¶12. (C) Comment: Ma's views track with the prevailing opinions of most of the diplomatic community. While he says that the Ivoirian crisis is about political power and access to economic resources, one could argue that this is what "identite" is fundamentally about - who is Ivoirian and therefore who can hold power, own land, and make a legitimate claim to the country's resources. Although Ma was relatively frank in his comments about China's role in Africa and Cote d'Ivoire in particular, he did not discuss China's exploitation of Africa's natural resources. China would also benefit from a peaceful Cote d'Ivoire. Highlighting only China's commercial (and humanitarian) interests, he did not point out that China is already a major purchaser of Cote d'Ivoire's timber resources, albeit not through Chinese firms. End Comment.

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